

Edgar Allen Poe's Death, How Edgar Allen Poe Died, What Killed Edgar Allen Poe?

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The death of Edgar Allen Poe has remained a mystery for over 160 years. From the day he was found delirious on a wooden plank outside Ryan's Saloon on Lombard St. in Baltimore on October 3 by Joseph Walker, the mystery has only deepened. He was taken to Washington College Hospital, where he died early Sunday evening, October 7. Poe never became coherent enough to explain what really happened to him.

For years it was thought that Poe died from complications of alcohol and drug abuse, and it is what most people think when asked what killed Edgar Allen Poe. In 1848, a year before his death, he nearly died from an overdose of laudanum, which was used as a pain killer and tranquilizer at that time. We do not know if it was a suicide attempt or accident, but laudanum didn't kill him in 1849.

Poe's reputation as an out-of-control alcoholic is not accurate. His drinking companions acknowledged that his drinking was not habitual, and he would go months without a single drink. Even more puzzling, at the time of his death he was a member of the Sons of Temperance.

The drinking "smear" was exaggerated and perpetuated by Dr. Joseph Snodgrass, who was an acquaintance of Poe and received the request for help from Joseph Walker, the man who found Poe delirious on the street. Snodgrass, a fervent champion of the temperance movement, was so impassioned about his cause that he exaggerated and manipulated evidence in such a way as to make it look like alcohol killed Poe. Snodgrass repeated this claim in his temperance lectures throughout the 1850s and into the 1870s.

The vast majority of Poe biographies attribute his death to "cooping." Cooping was a practice in the United States during the 19th century by which innocent people were coerced into voting, often several times, for a particular candidate in an election. Generally these innocent individuals would be grabbed off the street by cooping gangs or election gangs. They would be kept in a



room, called the coop, and were given alcohol or drugs in order for them to follow orders. If they refused to cooperate, they would be beaten or even killed. Often their clothing would be changed to allow them to vote multiple times. Sometimes the victims would be forced to wear wigs, fake beards, and mustaches as disguises so voting officials at polling stations wouldn't recognize them.

Edgar Allan Poe was found on the street on Election Day in Baltimore, and the place where he was found, Ryan's Fourth Ward Polls, was both a bar and a place for voting. At the time, elections in Baltimore were renowned for their violence and corruption. The day Poe was found he was wearing someone else's clothes. His black wool suit was replaced by a soiled one of cheap gabardine, and on his feet was a pair of old worn-out shoes. Gone were his good black boots. The cooping theory was first put forward by John R. Thompson in the early 1870s to explain the fact that Poe was wearing someone else's clothing and his battered condition.

In 1996 at the Historical Clinical Pathological Conference (CPC), sponsored by the University of Maryland School of Medicine and the Veterans Affairs Maryland Health Care System in Baltimore, Dr. Michael Benitez, a cardiologist at the University of Maryland Medical Center practicing a block from Poe's grave, presented his review of the historical accounts of Poe's hospitalization. Rabies, he believes, may have killed Edgar Allen Poe.

Dr. Benitez stated that Poe was not drunk when he was found, and "I think Poe is much maligned in that respect."

Historical records of Poe's hospitalization reveal he was delirious with tremors and hallucinations when he came in. He slipped into a coma, came out of it, was calm and lucid, then fell into a hallucinating state shouting at imaginary people, and requiring restraint. He died on his fourth day in the hospital.

Dr. Benitez reviewed all possible causes for delirium: trauma, vascular disorders, neurological problems including epilepsy, and infections. Withdrawal from alcohol can also induce tremors and delirium. Poe was known to have used alcohol and laudanum, but according to medical records, he had abstained from alcohol for six months before his death, and there was no evidence of him having consumed alcohol when he was admitted to the hospital.

"In addition, it is unusual for patients suffering from alcohol withdrawal to become acutely ill, recover for a brief time, and then worsen and die," says Dr. Benitez, who went on to state that withdrawal from opiates does not produce the same set of symptoms displayed by Poe.

In the final stages of rabies, Dr. Benitez says, people often have periods of confusion, along with wide fluctuations in pulse rate, respiration, and temperature. All these symptoms were evident in Poe, according to medical records kept by Dr. John J. Moran, who cared for him in the hospital. Also, the median length of survival after the onset of serious symptoms of rabies is four days, the exact number of days Poe spent in the hospital before he died.

Interestingly, according to Poe's doctor, Poe refused alcohol offered to him while in the hospital and had difficulty drinking water. Dr. Benitez believes this may be a symptom of hydrophobia, a fear of water, a classic sign of rabies.

Poe was known to have kept several cats and other animals as pets. Despite the fact that there is no hard evidence of Poe having been bitten by a rabid animal, rabies victims often can't recall an animal bite. Rabies symptoms can take up to a year to appear and when they do, most infected people die within a few days. The disease kills swiftly.

According to Dr. Henry Wilde, who often treats rabies at Chulalongkorn University Hospital in Bangkok, Poe "had all the features of encephalitic rabies."

"Poe's death is one of the most mysterious deaths in literary history" says Dr. Philip Mackowiak, who runs the Clinical Pathologic Conference at the University of Maryland Medical Center.

"The account on which Dr. Benitez based his findings was more consistent with rabies than with anything else, but the definitive cause of Poe's death will likely remain a mystery," says Dr. Mackowiak.